

REVIEW

BOOK

We Chose Peace: An Insider’s of the Bangsamoro Peace Talks

Miriam Coronel-Ferrer

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We Chose Peace: An Insider’s Story of the Bangsamoro Peace Talks, a book by retired professor of political science Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, is an autobiographical account of her experience as peace negotiator for the Government of the Philippines in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). During the important milestones of the peace talks, Coronel-Ferrer, through her book, meticulously followed a narrative that intertwined with her own daily journals.

In Colonel-Ferrer’s reminiscence, the stages of the peace process were chronicled in eight parts, each part consistently highlighting the role and participation of women as actors of peace. The first two parts inventoried the composition of the panel of negotiators. Only the third and seventh parts and a portion of the eighth part specifically mentioned technicalities of the Agreement itself. The rest of the chapters were devoted to anecdotal accounts of circumstances developing and surrounding the talks—in the socio-political scenarios in Mindanao, in Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia as venue of the talks, in the national government in Manila, Philippines from where her mandate emanated, and, most casually, among the individuals and communities involved.

The text thereby invites readers to appreciate and validate her anecdotes with their own personal knowledge, inferences, and imaginations, or simply to initiate their curiosity to venture behind the scenes and meet the supporting cast in their animated selves. All in all, for the best portion of the book, the author takes readers into confidence, so they can hear the background noises and probe these man-on-the-street stories featuring people and places that buzz around the formal table talks.

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If there were weaknesses in the writing, these are but incidental. One, those expecting the rigidity and textual objectiveness of legalese and academic discourse of a professor will of course be disappointed. Two, anyone looking for the religious nuancing and cultural essays on the “Bangsamoro” and Muslim Mindanao will not find them in the book. Still, to allow for contextualized reading, Coronel-Ferrer attempted to be comprehensive in perspective by providing the backdrops of antecedent historical, socio-political, and ideological details prevalent locally in the Muslim region as well as nationally. Emphasizing the “Bangsamoro,” as suggested in the title, is not among the appeals of this book. The author has categorically qualified the matter in Part One as she established and delimited her speaking as a “Non-Mindananaw in the Panel.”

Coronel Ferrer writes from a woman’s knowledge and understanding of society. Her accounts reference a woman’s interventions in a political action such as the peace talks, suggesting feminist approaches to political negotiation. The book precisely illustrates the magical word that was born out of this process, namely the modifier adjective “meaningful,” which emphasizes the substance and quality of women’s participation in the politics of negotiation. Meaningful participation was concretely demonstrated by Coronel-Ferrer by leading negotiators in turning talking points into consensus and effectively transforming the series of dialogues into a Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB).

Coronel-Ferrer might not have planned it, but she was well prepared for the eventual role exchange when she signed on to be the “second man” in the government panel. Expeditiously replacing Marvic Leonen, she carried out her mandate as State Negotiator with honest capability and intelligence, whence, proactively she assumed the “body”—a male body, that is, to use her metaphor—then, while wearing it and bearing with it, naturally and significantly subverted it into a surrogate, to be impregnated, and to deliver so that from its womb could be born Peace—peace enabled to speak a woman’s voice.

Woman fussing, glossing, turning around, and turning on power.

In the formal spreads of table talks or on the flattened plains of stages, ceremonies that Miriam Coronel-Ferrer reconstructed were fondly and womanly characterized by the various dresses worn—fancy or plain, colorful or drab, they paraded across the readers’ minds. Tangible as elegant suits and chic ternos embracing bodies, peace talks ceremonies were also garbed with subtle and mysterious smiles and frowns.

The book engages through an almost quasi-fictive experience of showing the reader into a room, ushering them to a table, or being seated in the front row as part of the audience, meeting actors as though they are coming out of a movie screen. But these are not mere spectacles of impersonal dolls of dignitaries one is used to in a documentary or glossy publicity materials. Upon turning the book’s last leaf, one is left savoring the familiar afterglow of a good flick. The experience

of finishing the book is definitely not that of the draining exhaustion of sitting for hours as a mere spectator of a kindergarten school moving-up program. As such, the individual essays compiled into the book can pass for creative non-fiction.

Fussing over the fading sparkle of a repeatedly worn blouse, fumbling with the buttons of a particular formal suit, fingering peeled-off leather, and the near-disaster of stumbling over in a broken high-heeled shoes, Coronel-Ferrer, in a number of episodes, recalled personal fiascos in performing mundane bureaucratic exercises, certainly intending—and succeeding—in wittingly pointing to the diligence and scruples of a woman and the efforts she invests as well as in how she wiggles out of crises with the natural grace and supply of optimism of creative energy. All these she repeatedly demonstrated in the close to 50 episodes of “exploratory talks” spanning four years of exchanging notes and dialogues.

In the last chapter, the same natural grace and optimism are reiterated. The reader is asked to imagine and conjure up a woman and help birth her from obscurity. We are to participate in assuaging her doubly obscured pain, one that lingers in a smile hidden from view on a mujahidat’s lips, the smile belonging to a face attached to a body hidden from us inside a burka. She is present but barely there. Perchance we feel the presence as revealed in the pain, in the pointed lines she delivers, albeit cushioned in the euphemisms of circumstances of her invisibility. And by speaking out the few words assigned to her, she stilled everyone into silence, ergo, peace. “How can there be peace? There is no peace as long as guns are everywhere,” came the soft voice from behind the swath of black cloth.

Now, contrast that with the controlled mirth of a lady diplomat armed with Angry Birds balloons, body shaking and laughingly bursting into frenzied dancing, who would become BFFs (Best Friends Forever) with the Mediator and bend his stiff demeanor. The latter, sporting a thinning princely pate, this Malay statesman, hesitant at first, allowed himself to be vulnerable, his male body dropping its guard and turning effeminate, letting his hair—as never she minded that it was barely there—stream down and let loose, and be carefree.

These two details of the feminine coming-out from either woman and man are satisfyingly heart-warming, and candid translations of the minute subtleties of peace languaging that Coronel-Ferrer resorted to in choosing to stream peace into her storyline. Passing for jokes and puns, or intending to sound as sardonic remarks as sarcasms are wont to evoke, women’s peace stories create an impact on readers of gentleness and fondness for the people and circumstances that Coronel-Ferrer wants us to remember. Glossed and woven into the juxtaposes of thick breaths of power and the sticky steam of politics where they took place, these stories leave *affective* lessons on womanly tact and maneuver.

Tacit and tactical, obviously aimed to disarm, Coronel-Ferrer is forthright when necessary in using the subtlest of metaphors by reclaiming a woman’s fussiness not to reiterate her embarrassments or shame. She exposes her vulnerability and

fickleness without minding the cost of her own self-devaluation. Wit and humor are to return to her aid as the very power to turn around and claim the table, often succeeding in disrupting the insistence of dichotomous monochromatic male obstinacy in serious, tradesman-like haggling, allowing for pauses to sleep things over. In the final analysis, above the bureaucratic formalities of written language and behind all the frivolities of final ceremonies, are humans simply dreaming of coming home to sleep soundly in the peace of night.

The featurized and anecdotal writing may be more journalistic than academic, but in weaving arguments around carefully picked everyday feel-good stories, Coronel-Ferrer effectively segregated lovable human flaws from the tangle of hypocritical straight-facedness of ceremonies. Like how she would have plucked wildflowers in the sterility of manicured garden weeds, Miriam Coronel-Ferrer has picked and chosen Peace as her insider story's language.

REVIEWER

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